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The Elephants of Africa

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Video Review

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In this videotape, Cynthia Moss visits African elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) in four locations: Amboseli, Kenya; the Congo River Basin (Central Africa); the Namib desert of Namibia (Skeleton Coast elephants); and Queen Elizabeth National Park, Uganda. She contrasts the herd structures, anatomical features, and behaviors of the elephants from these diverse regions.

As a point of reference, Ms. Moss shows the savannah or bush elephants of Amboseli (*Loxodonta africana africana*) with their family units of 5–20 animals, made up of some combination of a matriarch, sisters, daughters, and juvenile elephants of both sexes. She discusses mothering by relatives (allomothering) and the fact that males leave the family unit at about 14 years of age. The forest elephants (*Loxodonta africana cyclotis*) have been studied for many years by Andrea Turkalo, who guides Ms. Moss through the rainforests of central Africa. Surprisingly, Ms. Moss says that there are more forest elephants in Central Africa than there are bush elephants in East Africa. They are smaller than the bush elephant—five to six feet high at the shoulder—with a different body shape. Their legs are relatively longer, their tusks are thinner and straighter, and their ears are smaller and rounded. Their body shape has adapted to moving in the dense forest, and their diet has become more "gorilla-like" (more roots, seeds, and leaves). The family units are small, typically an adult female and one to three calves, but larger groups congregate around forest clearings to consume water and salt.

Moving from the forest to the Namib desert, Ms. Moss is guided by Blythe Loutit. Here the elephants go without water for three to four days at a time, and make 80-mile round trips between water sources and food sources. The elephants are tall, with long legs and large feet. They use dried river beds as paths, and remember the locations of water sources hidden two feet beneath the surface. The older animals remember where everything is, since the herds don't have the luxury of discovering their resources anew each year. Their family units are larger than those of the forest elephants—the unit in the video has six members—but there are relatively few calves, reflecting the harsh environment.

The final visit is with Eve Abe in Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda. There is plenty of food in the rich environment, but the elephant herds were, literally, decimated during the 1970s and 1980s by the poaching and killing in this warring region. After the conflicts, the surviving elephants congregated in large herds of 150 animals, most of them under 20 years old. It has taken five years for the demographics to return to the small family units typical of Amboseli. With the absence of mature males, the young males, only 15 years of age, are mating with adult females, a phenomenon virtually never seen in Amboseli. The females are producing calves every three years, rather than the four- to five-year interval typical of Amboseli, and there are more twins. An interesting quirk is that the frequency of tuskless calves is increasing, probably because poaching removed most of the tusked males, leaving the tuskless males more opportunities to mate. This may be the beginning of a population of tuskless males, as is common in Asian elephants.

The video ends with Ms. Moss' comment that African elephants have been remarkably flexible in adapting to environmental demands but, in the end, their survival depends on the human population.